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ABSTRACT

While the debate over the role of metaphor in language, thought, and meaning is not new, in the past decade there has been a move among organizational scholars to use metaphors in critical research. This paper presents a review of one area of the existing literature on metaphor--that dealing primarily with the nonliteral view of metaphors within the organization. The paper also develops a discussion and critique of the use of metaphor in critical theory, pointing out that critical research looks for systems of power and domination in the organization and that reality is socially constructed. Lastly, the paper provides suggestions as to how the organizational researcher can use critical theory without succumbing to the pitfalls discussed and considers some of the potential rewards of critical research. Among the recommendations put forth in the paper are: (1) before engaging in critical research, the researcher should be aware of the implications of his/her position on meaning and reality; (2) the researcher must consider the desires of the group he/she considers to be oppressed; (3) the researcher should attempt to gain some understanding of the social reality of the individuals under study; and (4) the researcher should always be aware that his/her work may be ignored or rejected. Contains 35 references. (NKA)

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Metaphors are Taffy:
A Consideration of Critical Research in Organizational Metaphors

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ABSTRACT

Metaphors are Taffy:
A Consideration of Critical Research in
Organizational Metaphors

The consideration of the role of metaphor in language, thought and meaning is not a new topic in academia. While the debate over metaphor is not new, in the past decade there has been a move among organizational communication scholars to use metaphors in critical research. This paper attempts to provide a review of one area of the literature which exists on metaphors. Additionally, a discussion and critique of the use of metaphor in critical theory is developed. Lastly, this paper provides some suggestions concerning how the organizational metaphor researcher can use critical theory without succumbing to the pitfalls considered here.

Metaphors are Taffy:
A Consideration of Critical Research in Organizational Metaphors

> Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice it. It is omnipresent: metaphor suffuses our thoughts, no matter what we are thinking about. It is accessible to everyone: as children, we automatically, as a matter of course, acquire a mastery of everyday metaphors. It is conventional: metaphor is an integral part of our ordinary everyday thought and language and it is irreplaceable: metaphor allows us to understand our selves and our world in ways that no other mode of thought can (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. XI).

The consideration of the role of metaphor in language, thought and meaning is neither a new nor a small debate. Various authors have argued the ontological status of the metaphor, its production, its use in poetic forms, comprehension of the metaphor, its relationship to thought, its role in the production of meaning, its relationship to organizations, and its place in the creation of power relations. While the debate over metaphor is not new, in the past decade there has been a move among organizational

communication scholars to use metaphors in critical research.

Although the use of metaphor in critical research has begun, it is still in its early stages. Therefore, a detailed consideration and critique of such research could be a valuable asset to the field. This paper attempts to provide an extensive, albeit not complete, review of one area of the literature which exists on metaphors. Additionally, a discussion and critique of the use of metaphor in critical theory will be considered.

Review of Literature

The multitude of theories that exist on the role of metaphor tend to be somewhat divided between those that see metaphor as a literal expression of relationships between real objects and those that see it as something that goes beyond the literal. An underlying assumption of the literal view is that language is representational; that is, language can accurately represent reality. The nonliteral view assumes a strong link between language, perception, knowledge, and meaning. It sees language not as a way to represent reality, but as a way to create it (For discussions of the split, see: Ortony, 1979; & Davidson, 1978). For the purposes of this literature review, the focus will be narrowed to those theorists who have worked primarily with the nonliteral view of metaphor.

One area of metaphor research which does not fall strictly into one of the two camps is one which concerns the production and comprehension of metaphor. These articles focus on the ways in which people process and come to understand and use metaphor (See for example: Emig, J., 1972; Gardner & Winner, 1979; Gildea & Glucksberg, 1983; Gregory and Mergler, 1990; Paivio, 1979). As such, these works may take either a literal or nonliteral view of metaphor.

Within the nonliteral view, theorists have considered metaphor in a variety of ways. Authors such as Yerby (1989), Rawlins (1989), Jorgenson (1989), Haley, (1976), and Laing (1972) consider the role of metaphor in structuring our perceptions of interpersonal relationships. Tracy (1978) studies the role of metaphor in religious belief. The work of these authors is founded in a nonliteral view. However, this work is less directly connected to the critical research under consideration here than those we will next address.

Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) volume on the role of metaphor in everyday thought is one of the most often cited works on metaphor in the last decade. In this work, the authors argue that metaphor is not just a form of language, rather it is embedded in the ways we think and act. Lakoff and Johnson provide an account of metaphor and its pervasiveness in everyday life. They also address the issue of meaning in terms of objectivism, subjectivism, and the

experiential stance. They conclude that the experiential stance is more satisfying because it provides a richer way of illuminating the processes of understanding and experience which exist in our lives (see also: Lakoff, 1986a; Lakoff, 1986b; Lakoff, 1987a; Lakoff, 1987b; Lakoff, 1989). For example, Lakoff and Turner (1989) analyze the role of metaphor in poetry. While limiting this particular analysis to poetic discourse, these authors provide further support for the position that metaphor constitutes one of the basic ways in which humans develop meaning. In this work, the authors use this idea of metaphor to illuminate how poetry engages us.

With a basis in the ideas presented by Lakoff, Johnson, and Turner, some scholars have moved to a more explicit consideration of the ideological role of metaphor. Mumby and Spitzack (1983) argue that television news uses metaphor in a way which functions ideologically because it "continually presents a perspectival view of the world, while simultaneously absorbing alternative or oppositional realities" (p. 171). They state that by analyzing metaphors and their relationships to ideology we can show how reality is structured through language. Additionally, by presenting new metaphors we can create new realities and thus expand the world as understood.

Some articles go so far as to consider the role of metaphor in ideologically structuring the whole world. That is, they argue that there is a predominant metaphor which

has structured all Western thought and our ideas of reality and meaning. As such, these works indicate that there is no nonmetaphorical concept (see for example: Reddy, 1979; Wheeler, 1987; & Wheeler 1990).

The area of research which will be focused on here is the consideration of the nonliteral role of metaphors within the organization. Gareth Morgan (1986) provides us with a volume which considers some of the various metaphors which are applied to the organization. His underlying assumption is that the use of metaphor "implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally" (p. 12). The book explores metaphors of machines, organisms, brains, cultures, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination. The book also attempts to express a way of producing diagnostic and critical readings of organizations which will allow us to find new ways of addressing organizational problems.

In addition to Morgan, several other researchers have studied the place of metaphor in organizational reality constitution (Koch & Deetz, 1981; Deetz, 1986; Pondy, 1983; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987; and Smith & Simmons, 1983). While some of these authors take an interpretive stance and try to illuminate the role of metaphor in organizing and organizational meaning, others do take a more critical stance. Deetz and Mumby (1985) exemplify the critical move. The authors examine the role of metaphors in the political power structures which exist within organizations. They

suggest that metaphors play a role in the construction of particular organizational information. Thus, they indicate that by using metaphor as a means of analysis and critique the role of power in organizational information can be assessed and more adaptive forms of information developed.

This literature review does not provide a complete discussion of all works done on metaphor, even within the nonliteral view. However, it should provide us with the basis needed to enter into a more developed discussion of metaphor as used in a critical approach.

Organizational Metaphors and Power

Before we begin to consider what metaphors do, perhaps it is best to attempt to define what metaphors are. Pondy (1983, p. 159) states:

> Let us mean by a metaphor the assertion, perhaps made indirectly and surreptitiously, that "A is B", where A and B belong manifestly to two different categories (e.g. individual human beings and baseball teams) . . . But sometimes two things or events are identified over and over in different ways over long periods of time. Let us refer to those uses as "extended metaphors" (Pondy, 1983, p. 159).

Some examples of metaphor would be statements like, "Graduate school is prison," or "A Phd. student during

prelims is a time bomb." Many extended metaphors can be found in any culture. Some examples of extended metaphors in the United States are: "Argument is war," "Time is money," and "Courtship is hunting." There are various ways that the "Courtship is hunting" metaphor can be indicate through discourse. Statements such as:

"There are plenty of fish in the ocean."

"He is on the prowl."

"She got a good catch."

"He is quite a prize."

"They went out to try and scare up some women."

"She's a quail."

"He bagged one."

Are all reflective of a way of seeing courtship as a hunt. What is important to remember is that metaphors do not simply exist in our discourse. As stated by Deetz and Mumby (1985, p. 370):

> Perhaps the most central human institution is language. Language participates with other institutions to provide humans with a way of being in the world. Like other institutions it positions cultural actors to make certain distinctions, to highlight certain aspects, and make other parts of the world into background (Deetz & Mumby, 1985, p. 370).

Therefore, metaphors do not just pervade our discourse. Instead, they give us a way to understand things. They create meanings for our activities, relationships, history, and future. Lakoff and Johnson further consider this point by indicating:

> It is important to see that we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 4)

Metaphors have this power by virtue of their "grounding in experience. A metaphor makes sense only because we are able to overlay one aspect of our experience on another" (Deetz & Mumby, 1895, p. 376). If we had no experience with the concept of hunting, the metaphor of courtship as a hunt would make no sense for us.

What should be apparent here is that metaphors exist not only in discourse but in our patterns of action and our basic meaning systems. Metaphors both produce meanings and are produced by them.

The role of metaphor within an organization is a powerful one. Metaphors which exist in organizational dialogue, and also those which exist in a particular culture and concern the process of organizing, give organizing and organization meaning. Thus, metaphors play a part in the creation of social reality. As defined by Deetz (1986, p. 168), "Social reality is the world view that organizational members take on as their own as they live and work in a particular society or in a 'micro-society' such as an organization." As a part of the production of social reality, metaphors guide organizational members perceptions of what is real, what is of value, and what their role in the organization is about.

While organizational metaphors allow individuals to see some aspects of an organization, they also prevent us from attending to other facets. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Deetz & Mumby, 1985; Pondy, 1983). For example, imagine you are part of a highly competitive organization where the dominant metaphors are "organization is competition" and "organization is war." A coworker attempts to enlist your participation in a project which is likely to be quite a success. You will be inclined to believe that she is only asking for your help because she can't do it herself, but she will take all of the glory in the end. On the other hand, if the same situation occurred but the dominant metaphor was one of "organization is a team" you would be likely to see the event in an entirely different way.

While we have considered the role of metaphor in structuring the organization, we have not yet approached the origin of dominant metaphors. As stated by Lakoff & Johnson, (1980, p. 160);

> Most of our metaphors have evolved in our culture over a long period, but many are imposed on us by people in power. . . . In a culture where the myth of objectivism is very much alive and truth is always absolute truth, the people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true .

In terms of organizational metaphors, Deetz and Mumby (1985, p. 372), using a critical standpoint, indicate that:

> Organizational metaphors are not arbitrarily imposed. They emerge out of the infrastructure of the organization. As such they support the particular power interests within the organization, serving both to produce and reproduce the existing systems of domination.

However, because organizational metaphors become such a part of the ideology of an organization, members rarely question their origin. As such, they make "essentially human constructs appear fixed and external to those who created them"(Deetz & Mumby, 1985, p. 375).

From this view of metaphors as functioning to make existent views of reality and structures of power and domination seem natural and fixed comes the desire for a critical stance. The critical approach begins with a view toward the interpretive goal of illumining the meanings that are created through metaphors. However, the critical method does not stop there. This approach to research:

> adopts a more critical stance. Here the focus is not simply on providing insight into an individual's sense-making practices, but also on uncovering the deeper structure power relations which partly determine these practices. Further, a more critically oriented method provides social actors themselves with the means by which to both critique and change the extant meaning structures (Mumby, 1988).

Thus, the critical researcher does not just attempt to understand the dominant metaphors which function within an organization. Instead, s/he tries to open up the system by introducing new metaphors. As indicated by Deetz and Mumby (1985, p. 383):

> The development of alternative metaphors opens the possibility of self-determined change, in the sense that the structure is revealed as a human, social construct which is by no means fixed and immutable. Providing members with other ways to

> make sense of information in an organization allows for a more critical stance vis-a-vis the nature of power interests in that organization

Thus, the critical approach to metaphor attempts to introduce new voices in the discourse of the organization. The goal is to open the conversation to more participants, and to possibly effect change in the structures of power and domination within the organization. While this would certainly appear to be a valuable goal of research, there are both positive and negative consequences to be considered. In the next section, I will discuss some of the difficulties, as well as the benefits of critical research in organizational metaphor.

Critic reality vs. Organizational reality

Most of the concerns which I wish to address in the critical use of metaphor analysis relate to potential differences between the views of the researcher and the views of those researched. Many of these challenges are not new to critical theory, and while they apply to the use of the critical method in metaphor analysis, they also have been raised regarding critical research in general.

Frequently, because critical research looks for systems of power and domination, the findings of critical metaphor studies will suggest that some people in the organization are in a "minority" status. Minority, as used here will

follow Bayes (1986, p. 11) definition, "the 'minority' of minority politics is a minority that is not necessarily a numerical minority but rather is of minor status and is psychologically embedded in that position." Critical research then attempts to open up the system in such a way that these oppressed individuals are able to achieve some degree of emancipation from the dominant structures. However, difficulties can exist when the views, values, needs, and opinions of the researcher differ from those seen as oppressed.

First, critical research acknowledges that reality is socially constructed. However, when one engages in metaphor research, there is sometimes an implicit assumption that the researcher can come to understand the social reality of the organizational members. This is somewhat problematic due to the "outsider" status which the researcher has. Additionally, the researcher may even claim to see oppression or structures of power and domination that the individuals within the organization do not see. One response which has been given to this issue is that structures of power and domination suppress the individual to the point where s/he does not realize the oppression. Although many scholars would probably agree that this can happen, this response does not address the underlying problem. If we are assuming social reality as the basis for our research, can we say that our perceptions of reality are more "true" than those of someone else? That is, if the

individual does not see himself as oppressed or dominated, who are we to tell him that he is?

A second problem with the critical approach is also related to conflicting viewpoints of researcher and the researched. In some cases the individual may acknowledge their minority status within the system. However, because of a difference in values between the researcher and the researched that minority status may not seem as important to the individual. The minority may feel that she holds a certain power by virtue of her minority status. As discussed by Bayes (1986, p. 14), some individuals operate on negative power. Bayes states,

> The significance of those who use negative power is not the goods and resources they command; rather, their political importance derives from their patterns and habits of thinking that are alien to the dominant.

Thus, while the minority may recognize her place within the system, she may not value the significance of that structural relationship very highly. It is possible that the minority individual feels that her underlying power is of greater value than the overt position held by the majority.

A third possible difficulty with critical attempts at emancipation, is that the individual may not care to be enlightened/activated. It is sometimes said that ignorance is bliss. It is also sometimes said that he who rocks the

boat might get drowned. There is a possibility that some individuals who critical theorists see as oppressed may not wish to enter into a full consideration of their oppression. While they may, in the back of their minds, acknowledge their powerlessness they may not want to focus on that situation. If individuals do not really perceive the potential for change in the near future, they may feel that focusing on the situation will only add to their discomfort. Additionally, some minorities may feel that there is too much potential threat in an effort to change the system. They might rather stay where they are than rock the boat and potentially end up in a worse situation.

While the previous difficulties may seem as if I am discounting any possible benefits to critical work, this is not the case. There are many things to be gained by engaging in critical research.

Benefits of Critical Metaphor Research

While members of the many diverse cultures that can be found on our planet, and even within a single country, have different social realities, most people would probably agree that at any give time someone is being oppressed. The two major benefits of critical theory relate to that oppression.

An initial positive which may be gained through critical work is the "extension of the conversation." In many organizations, there are some people who feel that they cannot participate in the formulation of policy and change.

They feel that their voices are simply not heard. One of the initial goals of critical research is to promote a situation in which all voices can be heard. This attempt to encourage a multiple dialogue in the world is an admirable goal.

A second potential reward of critical research is the possibility of real change. If we can open the system up to those individuals who feel suppressed, it is possible that the structures of power and domination that led to that suppression can be changed. In a society where the minimum wage is hardly enough to support an individual, let alone a family, the possibility of changing the system is an exciting idea. Although critical research in organizations via metaphor will not change the world, it is possible that it could make changes in an organization. And, as discussed by Foucault (1979), because power in modern society is ascending rather than descending we can only begin to make changes in a society by engaging in widespread "no-saying" at the lowest levels.

A third, and perhaps some might say less necessary, positive result of using critical theory is the potential increase in legitimacy of the new types of academic research. Many of the questions that have been raised concerning critical research have a foundation in the scientific model of research. We find ourselves questioning the validity, reliability or ability to predict of critical theory. What is problematic about this is the application

of standards formulated in the assumptions of the scientific model applied to theory and research based on different assumptions. If critical research can become more practiced, hopefully it will also become more accepted. Therefore, the acceptable dialogue within the field will be increased. This will allow for more reflection on the standards we use to assess the value of theory.

Although this discussion of the positives of using critical research was not as lengthy as the consideration of the negatives, I do not wish to imply that organizational communication scholars should avoid critical research. However, I would like to suggest some implications of this discussion for the use of critical organizational communication research.

Implications

The use of critical theory is both full of possibilities and fraught with complications. The question is, how can the organizational metaphor researcher use critical theory without succumbing to the pitfalls considered here. I wish to make several recommendations for such an effort.

First, before engaging in critical research, the researcher should be fully aware of the implications of his/her position on meaning and reality. If s/he acknowledges a socially constructed reality, s/he must take

care not to present his/her view of the situation as the "real" one. If the researcher believes that organization members are functioning with a patriarchal family metaphor but those in the organization do not agree with this stance, this difference must be seriously considered. The researcher should not take the elitist position of saying that s/he knows more about organizational members' meaning systems than they do.

Second, the researcher must take careful consideration of the desires of the group s/he considers to be oppressed. If this group does not desire to be enlightened about social change such enlightenment should not be forced upon them. Of course, deciding whether a group has such desires will not be an easy task.

Third, the researcher should attempt to gain some understanding of the social reality of the individuals under study, with the knowledge that such understanding will be partial. Such an understanding will allow the scholar to address the issues which are of concern to the group in question, rather than those that are of interest to her/him.

Last, the researcher should always be aware that her/his work may be ignored, rejected, or ridiculed by the group s/he is trying to help. While this may be frustrating to the critic, it is all a part of allowing all voices to be heard.

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